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A COUNTRY CHILD

I. DINNER

The south window is full of geraniums. There is the sill, and there is the shelf above it. The leaves are big and green, and all turned toward the window-panes, as if they were trying to look out. The sill and shelf are broad, and there are so many leaves we can hardly see up the road to the church. The sun shines through wherever it can, and makes bright places on the floor.

The floor isn't quite dry yet. It smells the way it always does when it is mopping day. There is a big fire in the kitchen stove, and dinner will soon be ready. Bertha has the plates and things all on. She is our hired girl.

My mother's face is red. She says to Bertha: "I declare! if it keeps on gettin' warm, we'll soon have to move the stove out into the woodshed. S'posin' you pull down that curtain."

Bertha gives two or three pulls on the cord that makes the curtain go up and down. The curtain is almost as green as the leaves. There are little holes and torn places in it, and the sun shining through makes them bright and warm-looking. Some of them are so big that the light shines through on to the geraniums and on to the floor.

My mother opens the oven door and takes something out. Now I smell baked beans and Indian pudding instead of the floor. Bertha begins to mash the potatoes. She keeps talking about how much the men eat. She says: "Seems's if you never *could* get 'em filled up. They eat as though they'd never seen vittles before in all their lives."

My mother goes out to the woodshed door, and calls them to dinner. She says: "Din-ner-r-!" She makes the last part high and long, and I like it. I try to set some of the chairs around. I don't wear dresses any more.

I hear them coming, and I run to open the woodshed door. My father comes in first, and then August and Christian, and then my brother. It is Saturday, so my brother doesn't have to go to school. August and Christian are our hired men. They

throw their hats down on the floor, under the geraniums. Their boots and pants look dusty. They are putting in the wheat this week.

My father goes to the sink and washes. The others stand near the geraniums until he gets through, and then they wash, too. They take water out of the rain-water pail with the dipper, and when they are through they go to the woodshed door with the washdish and throw the water out. Christian makes a great noise blowing and snuffing when he is at the sink. Before my brother washes, he has to pump the pail full of water again. The pump always has to have a little poured in first, or it won't pump.

My mother says to my brother: "Now, see that you get the dirt off your hands before you wipe them on my towel!"

My brother says: "Aw, you needn't be so 'fraid o' your old towel. I won't hurt it."

We all sit down at the table. Bertha helps me into my high-chair. I sit between her and my mother. I have a pewter plate with letters and numbers all around the side. I know the letters, and I can count. I know lots of states and capitals, too, and I can read little words.

My father passes things, and my mother pours the cups full of coffee. We are all hungry. No one says very much, except Bertha. She always talks a great deal, and sometimes my father sniffs. He says she contradicts herself. August and Christian don't say anything at all. They take big mouthfuls, and drink their coffee in gulps with loud noises. When Christian sits down to dinner, he always lets out his belt.

We all have a second helping, and the men pass their cups for more coffee. Then my mother dishes the Indian pudding. Mine is soon gone, and I ask for more.

My father says: "What! more? Gracious me! who ever saw such a boy to eat?" My father's hair and whiskers are gray. He doesn't have a moustache. My mother's hair is black, and her eyes are almost blue.

The men push back from the table. My mother says to me: "Before they go, run in and get your pictures again. Christian and August ain't seen them yet."

I bring the pictures from the front room. My father brought them from the village yesterday afternoon. I have a dimpled chin and long curls, and am sitting on a nice chair with tassels and fringe on the arms. The fringe is fastened on with big, shiny tacks.

Christian says: "Ay mos' say dese ban pooty gude pictsurs. Dey lookin' yoost like yu." He begins to buckle up his belt tighter.

My mother says: "Run and get your real little baby picture, in the parlor, and let's see whether you have changed."

I have to run against the parlor door with my hands out, to get it open. I get the album from the stand. We all look at the baby picture. I have a little red dress on, and my arms are bare. My cheeks are so fat they stick out, and my eyes are round and black and shiny, and I have hardly any hair.

We all laugh, and then look at the other picture. August says: "All bot' o' dem iss mighda fine. Ain'd ut, Bert'a? De best vhat I efer seen alretty yet."

August and Christian get up and get a drink out of the well-water pail in the sink. Then they stand by the geraniums and get out their tobacco-boxes and take a chew. They stoop over and pick up their old slouch hats, and go out. The hats are all stained and dusty.

My father goes into the front room and sits down in his rocking-chair by the west window, and begins to read the *Patriot*. I set the chairs back, and go outdoors. My mother and Bertha clear the table, and my mother comes and shakes the cloth out of the woodshed door. The neighbors up the road can always tell when we are through dinner, because they can see the cloth.

They begin to wash dishes. I can hear the clashing and splashing, and Bertha talking, and once in a while my mother singing.

II. THE CIRCUS

My brother says: "Darn it! I wisht they'd begin. Seems 's if we'd been waitin' 'bout an hour."

We are sitting on a board seat in a great, big, light place, with tall poles and ropes everywhere, and cloth instead of ceiling and walls. My father and mother and Bertha are all here.

I have never seen so many people before, but my brother says: "Hmf! you ought to seen 'em last year." He starts to tell me about it, but just then there is a big noise, and he says: "There! now they're comin'. Now you watch! You're goin' to see a lot o' ponies and animals and things."

There are so many things to look at that I can't keep track of them all. My brother keeps telling me about everything, but I don't understand half the things that go by. Bertha keeps talking all the time, too. I like the big red-and-yellow wagons with the dressed-up people in them best, until the elephants and camels come along. The animals all look just like the ones in my A B C book.

Pretty soon a lady climbs away up among the poles and ropes and begins to swing. Her neck and arms and feet are white, and the rest is pink. My brother says that is because she has tights on. My mother says her hair is done up in a French twist. It makes me dizzy to watch her. I am afraid she will fall.

Pretty soon, all of a sudden the lady lets go. I give a big jump. I think she is falling, but almost before I can say "Oh!" she catches hold of another ring and begins to go up and down some more. Pretty soon she drops again, only this time she turns over. I jump worse than before. Every time she goes flying through the air I am so scared I don't know what to do. I am afraid I'll have to cry. She always catches the other swing just in time, but I dread to have her let go.

My brother says: "Aw, you needn't worry about *her*! They got a net under *there*. *She'll* never get hurt, even if she does fall."

My seat isn't comfortable. Besides, there is somebody in front of me so big that I can't see what the clowns down there in the ring are going to do. My father takes me in his lap.

My brother says: "Now, watch! One o' the clowns is goin' to shoot the other one out o' the cannon. See it, over there?"

It doesn't look like the cannon in my picture book. It is bigger, and has shiny bands around it. I am afraid it will hurt the clown, but I remember the lady and the net, and think that maybe they know how to keep him from getting hurt, too.

Bertha says: "Oh, there'll be some trick about it, you can depend on it. Land o' goshen! what won't they do to earn a little money? Just see how silly they look!"

The clown makes us a low bow. Then he goes into the cannon head first. He is all white clothes and frills, and his face is all white and red splotches. The other clown stands there. His face looks as if he were laughing all the time.

My brother looks at me and says: "What you got your mouth open so far for? It's your *eyes* you *see* with."

My father laughs. He puts his hand under my chin and presses it up till my teeth come together. He says: "Tell him not to worry about you. Tell him 't you don't go to the circus every day, and 't you're going to take in all you can while you got a chance."

The other clown lights a match. We can see it blaze up, even if it is so far away. Everybody is as still as can be. The clown reaches out with the match. There is a puff of light where his hand is, and at the same time a big puff of light and smoke at the other end of the cannon, without much noise, and out flies the clown, and stands there bounding up and down and bowing, only his white clothes and frills are gone, and he is all black and smoky. We all jump when the cannon goes off, and then everybody laughs and claps hands. When I see them, I begin to clap, too.

After everything is over, my father takes me by the hand and we climb down the seats to the ground. Then he picks me up. There is a terrible crowd, and it takes a long time to get to the door of the tent.

When we get outside, my father looks at my head, and says: "I guess you better put your hat on now, hadn't you?" Then he looks at my hands. He says: "Why! ain't you got your hat?" He turns around and says to my mother: "Ma, have you got his hat?"

My mother says: "Why, no! I wa' n't looking after his hat. I s'posed o' course you and he had it."

I am surprised. I thought I had my hat all the time, but it is gone. It was a new straw hat, with blue in it, and it had a ribbon. I feel so bad I begin to cry.

My father turns around. He shakes his head. There are ever so many people behind us. He says: "No! no use tryin' to go back in *this* crowd. We'd *never* get home." He starts on again. He says: "An' somebody's picked it up by this time, too, as like as not. Guess better let it go."

I begin to cry again. My father says: "There, there! never mind. It's gettin' on towards fall, anyway, and you couldn't wear it much longer."

When we get to the light wagon and get in, my mother holds me. We are soon out of the Village, away from the houses. My mother fixes me between her and Bertha, so I can put my head on her lap. The horses trot along a while, and then walk up a long hill. I feel awfully sorry about my straw hat.

It takes a long time to get to the top of the hill. Every little while my father shakes the lines and says to the horses, "Come! come! come!" or "Gck! gck! gck!" or else he whistles. We are going between some woods, and it is pitch dark, except when I turn my head and look up at the sky. We are all so tired that nobody says anything. The horses' feet and the wheels are all the noise there is.

My brother is in the front seat with my father. Pretty soon I hear him say: "*I'm* goin' to lay down on the bottom." Then I hear my father say, "Come! come! come!" again. The horses' feet begin to go faster. I know we are going down hill. I hear the wheels rumble, and feel them. My mother puts a corner of her shawl over my head. The horses go, *Trot-trot-trot-trot . . . trot-trot-trot-trot . . . trot-trot-trot-trot . . .* My hat is back there where all the people were. I keep hearing the horses go, *Trot-trot-trot-trot . . . trot-trot-trot-trot . . . trot-trot-trot.*

III. MORNING

I seem to be coming up a long, long way from somewhere out of something. I open my eyes, and see the ceiling and the walls of the upstairs room. There are bars and patches of sunshine on them, and every now and then they move. I hear a flapping noise that makes me think of the curtain. Then I remember where I am. The curtain is what makes the light move.

The bed is soft and warm. It is quite a while before I think

of my straw hat. I feel as sorry as I did last night. I don't know what we are going to do about it.

I roll over. The bedcords make a noise. The light is on the coverlet, too. I lie and think about the hat. Pretty soon I remember what my father said about it being almost fall, and that makes me feel better.

I hear the stair door open. I know my mother is holding it, and listening to see whether I am awake. She must have heard the bedcords. I make them creak a little more, so she will know. Pretty soon she calls: "Break-fa-a-ast!" It is just the way she calls the men to dinner, only not so loud. She calls twice, and the second time is like an echo. I can tell from the way it sounds that she likes me.

I say: "Mm-hm!" I know I needn't hurry. After a while I roll over to the edge of the bed and slip out on to the floor. I go out into the hallway and past the door of the big room, where they have the dances, to the head of the stairway. My feet make thumping noises on the rag carpet in my room and on the oilcloth in the hallway.

When I get to the head of the stairs, there is a little window. I stop and look out. I can see the barn and the straw-stack and the orchard. A long way beyond them all is the big marsh where the trains go, and then woods, and then hills and the sky.

The little window makes it light, and I notice my night dress. It is thin and white, with little green and yellow leaves on it, like the leaves and blossoms of the gooseberry bushes out by the garden. When I start downstairs my feet make two thumping noises on every step. The steps are so high for me that I have to put both feet on every one.

My mother is dusting the chairs. She has something white on her head, and is humming "The Sweet By and By." She stops just long enough to say, "Hello, Buggie!" and then goes on humming. I run across the floor to the bedroom and put my things on, and come out for her to finish the buttons.

My mother says: "Well, go out and eat your breakfast, and then come back again. It's all ready for you, on the table. Bertha 'll help you into your high-chair, if you want her to."

While I am eating my bread and butter and drinking my milk I can hear my mother dusting and humming. When she gets to the chorus, she always begins to sing:—

“ In the swee-e-et
By and by-y-y,
We shall mee-ee-eet on that beau-u-u-tiful sho-o-ore—.”

I go in and stand there while my mother finishes the dusting. The carpet is all swept clean, and the door and windows are open. The air makes my cheeks cool. She has got as far as the secretary, and that is always the last. The secretary is brown and shiny. It has three drawers, and a writing-desk that unfolds on top of them, and a part over the desk for paper and books and everything. The glass doors of the book part have soft, green curtains behind them, gathered into folds. They are bright and shiny, and always make me want to touch them.

Just as my mother finishes the secretary, the clock strikes nine. It is a tall clock, with a looking-glass in the door, and it stands on a shelf. It says, *Dong—dong—dong—dong*

My mother comes and puts her hand on the side of my face and neck, and says: “It was pretty late getting home last night, for a little boy, wasn’t it? And, dear me! you lost your hat, didn’t you?” I don’t know what to say. She says: “But I guess you got your sleep out, so we won’t worry about the hat.”

I say: “Wouldn’t they save it for us?”

My mother laughs a little. She says: “Well, I guess ’t ain’t very likely, with all *that* crowd o’ people!” She sits down. I stand by her knee. She says: “Well, I suppose you’ll want to read a little in your Primer before you go outdoors, won’t you? All right! bring it here.”

I go to the table and get the Primer off the pile of books on top of the dictionary. It is green, with a picture on the cover, and lots of pictures inside. The picture on the cover is of a little boy under a tree, reading a book. He looks like a good little boy.

My mother lifts me on to her knee, and says: “Let’s see! where did you stop last time? Oh, yes! here it is. It’s the naughty old fox. Well, go ahead!”

I begin to read:—

"See the sly fox.
He has an old hen.
He can eat the hen.
Is the fox shy too?
Oh, see how he can run!
Now he can run off to his den."

My mother sets me down, and says: "All right! now you can run along."

I say: "No, I want to read some more." I turn over the page. There are four pictures on it.

My mother says: "*Oh*, pshaw!" She lifts me up again. She says: "Well, if you want to, read another page."

I read: —

"See my big dog.
He can run at the pig.
See the old ape.
He has a nut to eat.
The cow is in the lot.
She may eat the hay."

Then there is a picture of two little girls with a box. I read: —

"Ann has a new box.
She has a pin in her box.
Ann, let me see the pin.
Now you can put it in the box."

My mother says: "There! I guess that ought to be enough. Run along!"

IV. THE EXHIBITION

My father locks the door and hangs the key up on the thermometer. We all go down the path to the road, and turn south toward the church. They are going to have an exhibition, and then a supper. Johnnie and Steve are going to be something in the exhibition.

We go past Steve's on the way up. He lives where the hill begins. He is one of the big boys, and goes with my brother, and they always have a hole in the straw-stack after threshing. They crawl in there and eat apples.

The church is on top of the hill. You can see farther from there than from anywhere. You can see across our house and Uncle Anthony's and the depot, over to Grandpa Tyler's and up

to the north burying-ground. It is all snow and dark now, but I keep thinking how it looks in summer, when the leaves are out.

We all sit in one seat. The church is warm and bright, and full of people. They have a curtain stretched across where the pulpit is. When they sing, or anybody speaks a piece, they pull half the curtain to one side, and half to the other.

I don't care much about the pieces and songs. I wish Johnnie and Steve would have the dialogue.

Pretty soon my father says: "*Now* watch!" He takes me in his lap, so I can see better. He says: "Now you're goin' to see David and Goliath. I 'spect it'll be wonderful."

We hear a bell tinkle. The curtains go apart, and there stands Goliath, with little David in front of him. I know it is really Steve and Johnnie, but I have to keep thinking about it, or I forget.

I don't look at David very long, because he is so little and Goliath is so big. I never saw Johnnie look so big. It must be the way he is dressed up. He has a big helmet on, with red and white scales, and queer clothes, with bright, iron-looking scales on them. The helmet makes me think of redhorse scales, only they are bigger. He has a big sword in his hand. It is the old army sword I see every time we go to Uncle Anthony's, the one Lennie had in the war. Steve looks ever so little. I can tell who he is, because he hasn't anything to cover his head.

I don't really understand what it is about. I keep wondering whether that is really Johnnie. My father says he thinks it is, but I can't see his face, and I don't feel sure. I am afraid Steve is going to get hurt, or something is going to happen to Johnnie. If it does, I hope it will really be Goliath instead of him.

Goliath begins to wave his sword in front of Steve. Steve is so short that Goliath stoops a little. Pretty soon he says, in a great, big voice: "Come to me and I will give thy flesh unto the fowls of the air, and to the beasts of the field." It sounds a little like Johnnie, but it is funny to hear him talk that way.

But Steve isn't afraid. He has a kind of slingshot in his hand. He whirls it around his head three or four times, and

says: "Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel whom thou hast defied. This day will the Lord deliver thee into mine hand."

Then Steve whirls the slingshot again, and something cracks against Goliath's queer-looking coat. Johnnie staggers. I catch my breath. I am awfully scared, and jump up on to my feet, to see better. Johnnie goes down on the floor with a terrible, smashing noise.

I begin to scream. The curtains come together, and I can't see Johnnie any more. My father puts his arms around me, and the people all clap hands, and look at me and laugh.

My father says: "Never mind! never mind! They're only makin' believe. That's all. *He ain't hurt a bit.*"

I stop crying. Pretty soon Johnnie comes out from behind the curtain by the wall, and comes to see me. He laughs, and says: "Was you 'fraid they was goin' to kill me, so I couldn't hand you out the mail any more? Not much of it!" My father crowds along, and Johnnie sits down and takes me in his lap. That makes me feel comfortable and satisfied.

The church has a basement, and we go down there for supper. Grandpa Tyler and Mrs. Tyler sit near us. Grandpa Tyler has long white whiskers and a big smooth upper lip. Mrs. Tyler is small, and talks in a thin little voice.

My mother ties a napkin around my neck. They have to get a box to put on my chair, so I'll be high enough.

We have oyster soup and crackers, and then bread and butter and pickles and cake. We can smell the oysters. They have a stove over in the corner, with a washboiler to make the soup in. The spoons clink, and everybody talks and laughs.

Pretty soon Grandpa Tyler looks at my father. He says: "By Godfrey, Hi! they must be some mistake about this."

My father says: "Why? What's the matter?"

Grandpa Tyler holds up his spoon. There is a little oyster in it. He says: "Why, I jest found this here oyster in my soup, that's all. You don't s'pose they could 'a' *meant* it, do you?"

My father and mother laugh. Mrs. Tyler says: "See here, Tyler, now! You jest stop your makin' fun o' things that way.

Ain't ye got no manners about ye?" Grandpa Tyler laughs. My father says: "*Now* see what you get!" Mrs. Tyler goes on: "Ye ought to be 'shamed o' yerself! They's plenty oysters in yer plate, if ye've only a mind to look fer 'em."

When we get through supper, they all sit around by the wall and talk. Mrs. Tyler says: "Well, they done mighty well, didn't ye think so? 'Specially Johnnie."

Grandpa Tyler says: "You're right about that. That there fall o' Johnnie's was one o' the most natural falls I ever see. I don't see how it could 'a' been any better."

Uncle Anthony and Aunt Phœbe walk down the road with us when we go home. Uncle Anthony stops to light his pipe. He says to my father: "Hi, jes' let me get around the other side, will ye? so's you can walk to windward o' me. I don't want ye to have to breathe this here smoke o' mine, 'cause I know you don't like smoke none too well."

Our house and Uncle Anthony's look dark and cold. Aunt Phœbe says: "Of all the lonesome-lookin' things on earth, it always seems to me 's if a house in the night time without the lamps lit was about the worst. I'm always glad when we c'n get home and light the light and turn on the draft."

We say good-night and go in. My brother doesn't come until after I am in bed. I hear him go into his room. He stopped to talk to Steve about the dialogue.

GRANT SHOWERMAN.

University of Wisconsin.